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ABSTRACT

Part of a larger study on the experience of teaching in the steel mill learning environment was an inquiry focused on professional development. Teachers and coordinators were all members of the Teachers Action Research Group for Educational Technology (TARGET), a group of adult educators interested in improving learning and teaching in career development programs in steel mills. Data collection methods included interviews with two men and seven women, observations of classroom dynamics, and a review of documents generated by TARGET. Interviews concerned interviewees' perceptions of their own professional development. Findings indicated no participant had any academic preparation in adult education; they arrived at their current positions almost accidentally; they seemed to possess a marked flexibility in relation to their careers; all exhibited a sense of mission for their programs and a fairly sophisticated sense of the possibilities of adult education; they recognized the need for career development centers to undo the bad educational experiences of workers; all coordinators worked to establish the centers as a safe space, an idea that carried over into offerings; learning the job and becoming a part of the culture were important parts of professional development and professional identity; professional commitment and renewal took many forms, including participation in national conferences, university classes, self study, and networking. (YLB)

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ED 471 833

Hitting the TARGET? A Case Study of the Experiences of Teachers in Steel Mill Learning Centers

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Abstract: This paper begins an analysis of the development of professional identity among teachers and coordinators in steel mill learning programs. Teachers and coordinators all have an extreme flexibility in thinking about their own careers and in dealing with the issues that arise in the workplace. They have worked to develop a sense of vision and a philosophy of adult education that allows them to connect with the learners while working at some semblance of professional growth.

Problem and Conceptual Framework

The experience of teachers in adult education settings has not been adequately studied. Although this is a burgeoning field within study of children's education, it is an area that has been largely ignored within adult education. Part of the reason for this may be the lack of professional preparation required to move into the teaching of adults. Another reason may be the transience of the profession, where there is a constant movement of individuals in and out of positions. This paper will begin an inquiry into the lived experience of teachers within adult education programs designed for steelworkers. In particular, it reports on a study that examined how teachers and administrators reflected on their practice and the implications this may have for the renewal of their practice. The teachers and coordinators in this study were all members of the Teachers Action Research Group for Educational Technology (TARGET), a group of adult educators, interested in improving learning and teaching within career development programs in steel mills. Clearly outside of mainstream adult education in terms of professional preparation (no degrees earned in adult education), these teachers and site coordinators approach their work with insight, sensitivity, and commitment. Characterization of this group through a single agenda such as knowledge production, social or political change, or popular education is a risky proposition because their diversity of experience, employment arrangements, and missions defy existing classifications as noted by Merriam and Brockett (1997). If there is an overarching purpose to their work, it is to empower learners to access learning opportunities and realize individual goals.

Prior research has found that while it is relatively easy for teachers to focus on technical or practical reflection, critical reflection is more difficult. It has been consistently noted that the re- educational process involved in critical reflection is time consuming and most practicing adult educators are limited by time and budget constraints. Starting from the work of Schon (1987), but expanding to the later contributions of Eraut (1994), Boud and Walker (1998), Brookfield (2001), and Fenwick (2000) we analyzed the experience of teachers in an adult education setting who are participating in action research as a source of renewal and program growth.

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Research Design

This is a case study of the experiences of teachers and administrators and their perceived processes of self-development within a specific adult education program. The Institute for Career Development (ICD) grew out of economic devastation in the 1980s when thousands of skilled steelworkers lost their jobs and were unable to apply their specific job skills to other industries. While tough times have recently re-emerged in the steel industry, for the past 11 years, steelworkers have been committing as much as 121,000 hours a year to voluntary instruction at more than 50 steel mill learning centers. The United Steelworkers of America (USWA) first proposed a joint labor/management education program to 13 domestic companies in 1989. The union deemed basic skills as portable enough to protect workers from future dislocation while the employers agreed that workers learning on their own time could lead to improved productivity and employee morale. An infrastructure that combines top-down oversight with local control of the planning and administration of on-site learning centers has resulted in a thriving combination of customized courses and tuition assistance benefits. ICD is a national office which serves the individual programs by developing curricula and assessments, conducting research, providing ongoing professional development and seeking funding opportunities, among other activities.

The Teachers Action Research Group for Educational Technology (TARGET) grew out of a federal grant project focused on creating attractive learning environments for workers. Program administrators as well as teachers from various steel mills were invited by ICD to assemble for the purpose of exploring common programmatic needs, sharing best practices, asking new questions, and systematically investigating instructional issues pertaining to the grant project. A professor of adult education was invited to join the team as an objective adviser on research techniques and educational trends. (Two of the researchers helped found TARGET in 1998, and one is a relative newcomer.) While the steelworker teachers were not necessarily aware of a need to conduct research, ICD hoped that TARGET would help to raise the consciousness of the members such that locally-initiated action research would become more common in the Career Development Programs. After completion of the first grant, TARGET was continued through inclusion in a second federal grant, and members willingly continued their participation.

The population for this study was made up of teachers and coordinators who work in career development centers and are members of TARGET. They work in steel mills in Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Two men and seven women were interviewed for approximately one hour each. These individuals had been employed from two to fifteen years in the Career Development Centers. Only one of those interviewed had worked in the mills as a steelworker. All but one person had Bachelor's degree and several others had completed Master's degrees or had pursued postgraduate work. One had entered a doctoral program, but had dropped out. Five of the seven women had some background in elementary or secondary education. The men did not have this background. No one had completed degrees in adult education although most had participated in workshops or taken university classes.

Data collection methods included interviews with TARGET members, observations of classroom dynamics and a review of documents generated by TARGET over the years. The researchers interviewed members of TARGET concerning their perceptions of their own professional development. The specific questions that this research addresses include: How did the teachers acquire the knowledge they feel they need to teach in the classroom or work in an adult education setting? How have they developed themselves professionally? What has changed in their attitudes toward adult education? How do they transfer what they read about adults into the classroom or

workplace situation? What shapes their professional development? How do they generate their own opportunities to reflect on their experiences and to improve their practice?

Data from interviews and observations were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Two readers coded all interviews and the codings were compared. Categories were developed that indicate the major components of teachers' professional development, and their feelings and perceptions about their work and working environment.

Findings and Conclusions

This study is part of a larger study on the experience of teaching within the steel mill learning environment. The particular focus here was on professional development. This preliminary analysis of the data shows several themes relating to professional growth, development and renewal within this specific context.

Career Trajectories and Flexibility

As noted already, none of the participants in this study had any academic preparation in adult education. As is the case with so many adult educators, they arrived at their current positions almost accidentally. Donna was not atypical in the unfolding of her career.

> My degree is in education. It's in elementary education, though. When I graduated, there were no positions available so I actually was subbing and I did short - like maternity leave type things, but it was in 1991 and there was just nothing available at that time in the field. I was then a director of a preschool and I enjoyed the elementary aspect more than the preschool, even though I love kids, it's not as easy to teach. It's not the same type of teaching as it is in actual school. The position came open in the career development program and I had my education degree so I kind of fit, even though I wasn't really experienced with adult ed work, but I thought the transition would be pretty easy and I found it was.

While the participants varied in their backgrounds, they all seemed to possess a marked flexibility in relation to their careers. They were also able to handle a great deal of ambiguity within their jobs. For example, Michael had tried a variety of careers before landing at career development. Speaking of his background he begins by listing his previous positions.

> ... I worked with a national publishing company, and then also had my own business, innovative graphics in marketing, we designed brochures, logos, promotional materials, put together events for businesses, and did a business to business show, hired instructors to help small businesspeople and I did some of that teaching, of marketing, how to market your small business, and that's what I did. And then, doing some work for the steelworkers, I was offered the position of the career development coordinator and I accepted.

Michael went on to note that when he first began the position it was full-time, but it changed considerably since that beginning. He then got laid off and went to work for a community college. He was called back part-time, but is now paid through the community college. He is also thinking of becoming a public school teacher.

Sense of Mission

Although there was considerable fluidity in the career paths of the individuals studied, they all evinced a sense of mission for their programs and a fairly sophisticated sense of the possibilities of adult education. They also recognize the need for the career development centers to undo the bad educational experiences of the workers. Many indicated that the most insurmountable barriers to participation were the bad experiences hidden away in the past. As David said,

> … I think that has to do with a lot of their high school, what they have learned in high school. You know, I think a lot of teachers have discouraged a lot of people to get back into adult ed. I think a lot of it has to reflect on what they've done in high school. If they had a bad experience in high school, it's real difficult them to think about going back into that, especially if they failed in high school. They don't want to be considered a failure again at the age of 40 or 35.

Safe Space

All of the coordinators worked to establish the centers as a safe space. The space was to be warm and welcoming. Mary summed up this attitude,

> And there are times we have a few people who we hate to see them coming because they come in and sit down in a chair and they'll sit for an hour. You know, and yet you feel like this is part of my job too. But they love to come in and just sit and talk. And I think because this site is right in the middle. … and we've tried to make it a nice place. We have plants surrounding, coffeepot out there. It's a safe place that they can come to during their job or between their job or before and after.

The idea of safe space also carried over into the offerings themselves. All career development centers are mandated to offer basic skills. The level of education was initially higher than anticipated and a more innovative approach was deemed essential in order to get workers to enter the center. Additionally, there was a commitment to confidentiality. Susan indicates the importance of this to the life of the center:

> And then again, the other piece was to really dispel the image that this was a center for dummies. You know, if you had to tell your co-workers, there's a certain amount of bravado in the workers, if you had to tell your co-workers, well I'm doing career development, yeah I don't know my fractions or I don't know my decimals or I'm a really weak reader, it's really more threatening to say that than to be able to say, I go to career development. Well, what does career development have? Well, they've got photography classes and home improvement classes and there's so many things being offered that really nobody pictures this as a center for dummies or remediation any more. It's a center for learning and learning can take many formats. So we've really created a nice umbrella for everybody to go to career development. So some of them might be working with Danielle's [a full-time teacher] basic reading skills, you know his co-workers might think he's taking advanced computer skills. I mean they would not have any idea. We've really protected their confidentiality.

Connecting to the Steelworkers and Learning the Culture

In addition to the safe space, learning the job and becoming at least a part of the culture were

important parts of professional development and ultimately of professional identity. This effort took a variety of forms. In several instances, the first step was to try to establish connections to the workers. For example, Ann made it a point to take classes at the career development center.

> ... I took taxidermy. ... when I first started working here and I thought how to get out and get in with these guys and get to meet them. And so, then I thought, what better way than taxidermy? So I took taxidermy. And I really enjoyed it! I didn't think I would, but I really had a good time in that class. ... I got to know a nice group of guys and, the problem we had was this whole group of guys was taking taxidermy and nothing else. And I think they just didn't understand what the program was all about. And I didn't know this before I took the class. Janet [the secretary] took a class with it, not with me, but she took it like right after me. And they got to know us, and they started coming in, and now some of them have gone on to take other things besides taxidermy. Now that could be because they got to know us or because we discontinued taxidermy, so I don't know what the cause was. We like to think it's because we were there.

Learning the culture of the mills and understanding the workers was of paramount importance to everyone as they set out to learn their job. The only exception was David, who had come out of the mills himself. David felt that independent knowledge of his fellow workers was the principal strength he brought to his job.

> ... I think I'm in a different scenario than a lot of the other coordinators because when the people do come in here, I've worked with them prior to them coming into the office and I think they're more open to the discussion part of it with me because I can get personal with them and talk about their job, what they've done. Knowing them prior to coming into the office, I basically knew what they did in the mill. I knew their hobbies. I think that's one of the things you've got to be more open to when you do an assessment as far as trying to find out what the individual does other than his work history or his education history, to make him feel more comfortable and let him know that this is for him, it's a union benefit....

Professional Development and Renewal

As with any job, professional commitment and then renewal took many forms as individuals expressed diverse views on their connection to the field of adult education. All took part in the national conferences held by the Institute for Career Development. Others took university classes and a few engaged in some form of self-study. The attitudes toward conference attendance varied. While some found it helpful, others were burned out. Chris stated this most eloquently:

> ... conferences, I have attended quite a few of those and truthfully I don't attend that many anymore because I am finding that they are not coming up with a lot of new things. I can remember attending one in Philadelphia and another committee person from Minnesota was there and he and I sat around and talked and it really blew my mind when we were there talking and three other people came over and said may we sit at your table and I says 'yeah' and they say, 'well you two seem to know more than what they're teaching us here about workplace education. So I thought, we you know, what's the sense

in paying to go to these conferences ....

Networking was an extremely important aspect of professional growth. This was particularly true in Northern Indiana where five mills are located close together, allowing coordinators to meetregularly and to share resources. Although the TARGET experience, by itself, was not perceived as strong area of professional development, it did allow the participants to focus on course and materials development in new ways. There was a kind of synergy between the opportunity to network, attend conferences, and the freedom to develop ideas and go into different directions.

These teachers and coordinators, like most adult educators, fell into the field. They have embraced it with differing levels of exuberance and commitment, yet all traveled somewhat similar paths. Learning the job and learning the culture of the steel mills went hand in hand, and in fact still do. The connection to the workers is one of the strongest areas that all individuals sought to maintain. Related to this was the notion that the career development centers are safe spaces, that they allow the workers a safe place to learn new skills or brush up on old ones. Finally, networking, action research, and the TARGET experience were all meaningful avenues for professional development. They allowed for the possibility of reflection while also providing tangible outcomes. Not only did the reflection help in developing innovations, but it also allowed teachers and coordinators to reflect on their best practices, to learn from others in a nonthreatening atmosphere, and to actually experiment with different strategies.

The experience of teachers within adult education settings is of crucial importance. While adult education researchers have consistently noted this, there is a surprising dearth of research on the actual lived experience of teachers. The TARGET model positions teachers as action researchers in their practice settings engaging in both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. We hope that consideration of this model as a heuristic device that enables teachers in this particular setting to reflect not only on their context, but also on their purposes, and their beliefs about teaching and learning will contribute to what we know about the relationships between action research, reflection, and improvement of practice.

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